

Brighton hotel bombing

Thirty years ago, the IRA killed five people and injured dozens more when they targeted Margaret Thatcher's Conservative Party Conference in Brighton, UK, writes **Tony Moore**

Although relatively small by IRA standards, the bomb that exploded in the early hours of October 12, 1984, killed five people and caused the midsection of the Grand Hotel to collapse into its basement, leaving a gaping hole in its facade. One journalist described it as the most audacious attack on a British government since the Gunpowder Plot in 1605; another suggested it was the most ambitious operation ever carried out by the IRA against the British.

The bomb, consisting of between 10 and 15 kilos of explosives, was placed behind a bath panel in Room 629, at the front of the hotel near the top, by Patrick McGee, an IRA explosives officer, who had booked into the hotel under the fictitious name of Roy Walsh four weeks previously. The device had a timer made from a video recorder, which was set to go off 24 days, six hours and 36 minutes after being activated by McGee shortly before he left the hotel.

Collapsed

In a nearby room, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher had just completed finalising her speech for the final day of the conference. She was safe, as were other ministers. Some were not so lucky and lay amid the collapsed rubble. Police were already on scene, monitoring the hotel and its surrounds from a temporary police control room in the building. Firefighters and paramedics arrived quickly, while police officers, some of them armed, deployed to protect the PM and other ministers from a secondary attack; a consultant surgeon staying at the hotel also offered his assistance. The police eventually sealed off the area surrounding the hotel to provide a secure zone in which the rescue services could operate.

Some had miraculous escapes, falling from the sixth floor along with huge lumps of concrete, but able to crawl out of the rubble. Others were not so lucky. The rescue of those trapped involved cutting through layers of rubble. Rescuers were helped by television camera lights, which lit up the scene.

Slowly, those who were trapped were removed from the rubble. This often meant medical personnel working alongside firefighters in confined and dangerous areas. Life-saving drips and injections were administered in some cases.



Two ministers, Norman Tebbit and John Wakeham were found sandwiched between layers of rubble and their mattresses – the latter having protected them from more serious injury. The rescue of Norman Tebbit was seen live on breakfast-time television. John Wakeham was the last person to be pulled out alive from the wreckage some seven hours after the explosion.

Their wives were not so lucky. Roberta Wakeham had been killed and Margaret

The Grand Hotel in Brighton was left with a gaping hole in its facade after the bomb attack by the IRA, which targeted the government of the time

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Tebbit was left permanently disabled. The other four people who died were Sir Anthony Berry, Eric Taylor, Lady Muriel Maclean and Jeanne Shattock, both of whose husbands survived. In fact Sir Donald and Lady Maclean had been in Room 629. Thirty-four people were taken to hospital.

Margaret Thatcher began the final day of the conference at 09:30hrs, as scheduled. She had planned to launch an attack on the Labour Party; instead she launched an attack on terrorism, suggesting that the attack was: "An attempt to cripple Her Majesty's democratically elected government." Some hours after the explosion, the IRA issued the famous statement, part of which read: 'Today, we were unlucky, but remember we only have to be lucky once. You will have to be lucky always'.

The investigation, led by the head of Sussex Police CID, Detective Chief Superintendent Jack Rees, began immediately. Mrs Shattock had been blown out of her room, across a corridor and into Room 638. Small fragments of bathroom tile had entered her body like bullets and she died immediately. Her injuries indicated the direction of the blast and also the seat of the explosion.

Eventually the seat of the explosion was narrowed to Room 629.

The task of tracing everyone who had stayed in the hotel in the weeks leading up to the conference was enormous. Eventually they went to the address given by 'Walsh' and found it to be false. But a sole fingerprint left on the registration card identified his correct name as Patrick McGee.

McGee was eventually arrested in Glasgow on June 24, 1985, along with other members of an IRA active service unit, who were planning to carry out further bombings on the British mainland. McGee was given eight life sentences and the judge recommended he serve a minimum of 35 years. He was released, under the terms of the Good Friday agreement, after serving 14 years. CRJ

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